

MANAGING COMMUNITY CAT POPULATIONS: WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Many conventional strategies have been used over the years to attempt to manage community cats. You might have tried them or have contemplated trying them, but here is why they don't work.

Trap and Remove or Relocate

Trap and remove may at first glance seem to be the logical approach to solving community cat problems. However, unless it is consistently performed with very high levels of resources and manpower and addresses over 50% of a targeted population, it doesn't offset the root of the problem: ongoing reproduction of un-trapped cats (Andersen and Martin, et al, 2004). The resources (money, manpower, etc.) required to capture this many cats simply do not exist, either in the budgets and capacity of government

agencies or in terms of public support. Haphazard lethal control efforts only result in a temporary reduction in the cats' numbers, essentially putting a band-aid on the problem and further distance from real solutions.

Moreover, while some advocates of this approach claim that the cats just need to be removed and placed elsewhere, there is no "elsewhere." Relocating cats is a complex task that is usually unsuccessful and creates more problems than it resolves. The vast majority end up "relocated" to shelters that have no other recourse but to perform euthanasia. Euthanasia in shelters is typically performed to end the lives of ill, dangerous, or suffering animals in a humane manner. When euthanasia is performed on healthy but unsocialized cats, it can be characterized as unnecessary, calling into question whether their deaths are actually humane.



Opposition from many in the community who oppose killing cats and insufficient resources to achieve the level of removal/euthanasia necessary to actually achieve results can often prove to be insurmountable barriers to lethal control programs. Communities that use trap and euthanize strategies typically do not realize reductions in the number of cat complaints, and cat intake at local shelters stays constant or continues to rise. Therefore, the only result of trap and remove/euthanize programs is turnover—new feline faces in the community, but not fewer.



“As a nation, we have over 50 years witnessing the ineffectiveness of trap and kill programs and their inability to reduce community cat numbers. It’s time we try the only method documented to work—TNR.”

—Miguel Abi-hassan, Executive Director,
Halifax Humane Society,
Daytona Beach, FL

“Bans on feeding feral cats do nothing to manage their numbers. Bans force feral cats to forage through trashcans and kill wildlife, such as birds, squirrels, and rabbits. Establishing feeding stations ensures a healthier colony and allows a human being to interact with the colony and provide care for any cat that is under stress or who needs medical attention. Feeding stations also bring feral cats to a central location and help establish a trust, making trapping [for sterilization] an easier task.”

—Wayne H. Thomas, Councilman,
Hampstead, MD

Feeding Bans

The logic behind banning the feeding of outdoor cats is that if no one feeds them, they will go away. However, this doesn’t work because cats are strongly bonded to their home territories and will not easily or quickly leave familiar surroundings to search for new food sources. Instead, they tend to move closer to homes and businesses as they grow hungrier, leading to more nuisance complaint calls, greater public concern for the cats’ welfare, and underground feeding by residents. People who feed cats will ignore the ban, even at great personal risk, and enforcement is extremely difficult, resource intensive, and unpopular.

Licensing Laws, Leash Laws, and Pet Limits

Laws intended to regulate pet cats and their owners don’t work to reduce community cat populations, because community cats do not have “owners” in the traditional sense.

Instead, they're cared for by volunteer resident caretakers who happen upon them. These caretakers should not be penalized for their goodwill; they are essentially supplementing the community's cat management protocols with their time and resources. Rather, laws should be designed to incentivize people in the community to care for these cats and to protect those who do so.

Caretakers don't choose how many cats there are, so pet limits are of little use. Because these cats are not owned, caretakers don't control the cats' movements, so leash laws are equally ineffective. Requiring community cats to be licensed by caretakers is a bad idea from an enforcement and compliance standpoint, and forcing caretakers to register colony locations often causes people concerned for the cats' welfare to go underground and off the municipal radar screen. Additionally, cat-licensing projects rarely pay for themselves and further drain already limited resources. Policies that impose penalties on caretakers are barriers to sound community cat management. However, proactive, non-lethal control programs can enlist the support of caretakers by gaining their trust, and they can in turn provide data on the cats people care for.

“While licensing a cat (like dogs) seems responsible, the unintended consequences of it are damaging. Licensing owned cats does not take care of feral cats that are not owned by anyone.”

—Councilman Rod Redcay, VP
Denver Borough Council, PA

Relocation and Sanctuaries

Some individuals or organizations may call for un-owned cats to be relocated or placed in sanctuaries. While this may seem like a humane alternative to lethal control, it is unrealistic due to the sheer numbers of cats in communities. Relocation is time-consuming and usually unsuccessful. Cats are strongly bonded to their home areas and may try to return to their outdoor homes. In addition, if the food and shelter that initially attracted the cats cannot be removed, other unsterilized cats will move in to take advantage of the available resources.

Some shelters and rescues have implemented successful barn cat programs, where unsocialized cats can be relocated to barns and farms to provide rodent control. But these programs require management and are by their nature limited. They can't address the large number of un-owned cats in the community.

Sanctuaries might be available in some areas, but those that provide quality care for animals quickly fill to capacity and are too expensive to maintain for large numbers of un-owned cats. Cat populations vastly out-scale availability at sanctuaries, making them an unrealistic option in most cases. Many unfortunate examples exist of sanctuaries that grew too large and resulted in neglect and cruelty. Moreover, these organizations cause an additional burden on communities, requiring law enforcement intervention and resulting in a large group of cats again needing to be removed and relocated. If you are able to secure a spot in a sanctuary, always visit it in person before sending the cat there, to ensure that all animals receive proper and humane care.

